

# The Alienation of the American Worker

BY ABRAHAM RIBICOFF

Joe Taylor is one of the "Forgotten People" of America's working class. He is forty-one years old, has been married for twenty-one years, and is the father of three children. His grandfather, a tailor, came from Poland with the name Zbroszczyk. An immigration official could not pronounce it; so, from that moment on, the American branch of the Zbroszczyk family has been known as Taylor.

Joe works in a factory, belongs to a union, and makes \$9,600 a year. He dropped out of high school, went to work at the factory where he has worked ever since, and married a girl, Mary, he had known since childhood. Their twenty-year-old son, Michael, a Vietnam veteran who cannot find work, lives at home. Another son finishes high school this year, is bright, and has been encouraged by his teachers to go on to college. But Joe does not know where the money will come from. Their daughter, Doris, is twelve. She wants to go to college, too, and Joe does not know where the money will come from for her, either.

The Taylors live in a two-story, twenty-five-year-old, four-bedroom, \$17,000 home near the downtown section of a middle-sized city. Their home has one bathroom. Mary has a clothes washer but not a dryer. She would like a rollaway dishwasher. But that is a luxury they cannot afford now. She would also like a garbage disposal. Joe would like to buy a color television set.

The Taylors are always short of money. Joe makes \$800 a month, but his take-home paycheck is only \$635. Grocery bills amount to about \$200 a month. From the remaining \$435, mortgage, telephone, electricity, and gas bills claim \$210, life insurance \$12, and car expenses including insurance and payments \$75. Their church receives \$2 a Sunday, or \$8 a month. Joe spends \$20 out-of-pocket a month, Mary about the same. Clothing, personal care, and other family expenses take up as much as \$50. They stubbornly save \$30 a month whenever possible. Therefore, if they are lucky—if the sink

doesn't stop up, if the children don't catch the flu, and if everything else works okay—the Taylors end up each month with about \$10 to spare.

There are eighty-two million working-class Americans like Joe Taylor—many of them in similar economic straits. They are quite literally broke all the time. Any serious illness requiring prolonged hospitalization could wipe them out financially. It is often impossible for them to send their children to college. Retirement presents the threat of virtually guaranteed impoverishment. They read about their being the most highly paid working people in history, but when they compare their lot with that of their more well-heeled contemporaries they sense that the gap between rich and poor is just as great as ever. They feel that their government has brushed them aside, that politicians and social service agencies are preoccupied with the problems of blacks, youths, and other more troublesome minorities, and that, in short, the working class is a forgotten class.

And they are right. Working families comprise the largest single group in the United States; yet as a society we have ignored their increasing difficulties and needs. America can no longer afford to do so. It is time to define the problems and propose solutions. As a first step we should take pains to examine the feelings behind working-class grievances.

In addition to their frequently desperate economic plight, working men and women increasingly sense a prejudice against them in academic, intellectual, and liberal circles. They know that some commentators and social critics blame many of society's ills on them. They also know an anti-working-class bias can be found throughout our society. Former U.S. Representative Allard Lowenstein of New York, who sparked the student movement to dump President Johnson in 1968, described the anti-lower-middle-class feeling at the colleges in this way: "Many young people see middle-class people as nothing but a bunch of big-bosomed, beer-drinking, drum-and-bugle-corps types." Eric Hoffer, the longshoreman-philosopher, says the feeling is mutual, asserting: "We are told we have to feel guilty. We've been poor all our lives, and now we're being preached to by every son of a bitch who

Senator Abraham Ribicoff was Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under President John F. Kennedy. This article is adapted from his book *America Can Make It*, to be published in June by Atheneum. Copyright © 1972, by Abraham Ribicoff.

## “Why should blacks have all the special treatment?”

comes along. The ethnics are discovering that you can't trust Mayflower boys.”

S. I. Hayakawa, the semantics professor who became president of San Francisco State College, believes the educated classes are dangerously out of touch with working families. “You and I,” he told a reporter, “can live in the suburbs and demand integration in the schools downtown. We can make the moral demands, and someone else has to live with them. We can say the war in Vietnam is a dirty, immoral act, while our children are in college, exempt from the draft. The working people's children are in Vietnam, and they're praying for victory. They want to believe America is right.”

These men and women look back upon the humble origin of their families in America, and they say: “We did it without federal grants. Why can't blacks? Why should they have all the special treatment?” It is not that they begrudge blacks progress in the redress of past wrongs. But working people feel the rules should not be changed now, making it easier for blacks than it was for them. They forget that the ancestors of most white working people, no matter how poor when they started out in this country, came as agents of Western culture and civilization to a country that needed millions of unskilled workers and were allowed to take advantage of the opportunities that the nation offered; blacks, on the other hand, came here in chains, found a civilization alien to the one they had left, suffered through an era when family life was not only discouraged but often outlawed, and now find an economy incapable of absorbing those with few skills.

Now that blacks are making gains, the white working people fear those gains are being made at their expense. The whites observe the blacks calling for solidarity, for unity, for “putting it all together.” To a group threatened, black efforts to organize are interpreted as the first steps in new assaults on white working people's rights, prerogatives, and life-styles.

In some instances, fear of economic loss is not a figment of the working-class imagination. Many black gains in housing, education, and jobs have direct impact on white working families. It is *their* neighborhoods into which aspiring blacks move, *their* schools to which blacks are admitted, and *their* jobs that blacks actively compete for. The close social and economic position of working whites and aspiring blacks has tended to pit these two groups against each other. White workers start thinking in terms of white solidarity—rather than worker solidarity. “Why not?” they ask. “The soul brothers are thinking in black-versus-white terms. Why shouldn't we do the same?”

For example, a white union member rationalized the fact that his union was closed to blacks with these words: “Some men leave their sons money, some large investments, some business connections, and some a profession. I have only one worthwhile thing to give: my trade. I hope to follow a centuries-old tradition and sponsor my son for an apprenticeship. For this simple father's wish it is said that I discriminate against Negroes. Don't all of us discriminate? Which of us . . . will not choose a son over all others?”

Liberals safely ensconced in the professions, business, and universities can articulate such bromides as that the victory of one man need not be the defeat of another and that rising black membership in unions does not necessarily mean fewer jobs for whites. But white as well as black workers know that when the black man lands a job in an economy with a limited number

of them, it is a job that could have been filled by a white. The equation is simple and does not require a college education to formulate. If there are  $x$  number of jobs and those jobs are all held by white workers, when a black wins a job, the number of employed whites is now  $x$  minus one.

Thus, the liberals and intellectuals seem to be siding with the blacks as far as the working class is concerned. Workers begin to feel it is they against the world—against the blacks, against the liberals, against the Democratic party they help support and elect—all of whom seem bent on reshaping American life at the expense of working people. It isn't fair, they say.

It is at about this point that the workers notice there are few people to articulate their thoughts and feelings. They look around and see that black people are organized and have spokesmen who lobby for their interests. But who speaks for working families, the American lower middle class? *They* have no full-time leaders, no contemporary heroes. Occasionally, a public figure captures their imagination and begins to articulate their problems. More often than not, however, such persons are addressing themselves to the weaknesses, not the strengths, of the working class.

It is a sad commentary on American society that Governor George Wallace has seemed to strike responsive chords in the working class. Agreed: There may be some bigotry and hatred in the hearts of working people. But, as the man seeking to give his son an apprenticeship noted, which of us is without some prejudice? There is also among those people an enormous reservoir of compassion, good will, energy, and longing for justice that men like Governor Wallace do not attempt to reach or encourage.

A union leader in Connecticut told me in 1968 that many of his membership would have supported George Wallace but for one fact: Listening to a Wallace speech, he said, did not make his men feel good; it made them feel remorse, as if they had sold out the values of human dignity in which they believed.

Vice President Spiro Agnew is also said to be a spokesman for the workingman. President Nixon himself seeks to relate to working families. But these two leaders likewise give working people only scapegoats—TV networks, militant blacks, and anarchistic college students—and very few positive reforms and accomplishments to improve their lives. Providing only scapegoats is smart politics, because everyone knows the poor and the black and the young do not vote in proportion to their actual numbers, but, clearly, it is not responsible politics in a country faced with growing hostility between white working people and the rest of society. Our nation's leaders should try to unite, not divide.

Some political observers have noted that, because for most blacks advancement means entry into the ranks of the lower middle class, federal efforts should be directed at improving the condition of those ranks. This theory argues that we will never solve the problems of blacks until we solve the problems of the lower middle class. For a time I myself advocated that approach. Yet as I thought about it, I came to realize that it is not the right reason for helping the working white families. We should set out to help the lower middle class because it is the right thing to do, not because it will indirectly help blacks. We should help middle Americans because they are vitally important and essential to the success of this country; because this nation would collapse without them; because they

## “Should we pay the rent this month or the hospital?”

erect our skyscrapers, dam our rivers, unload our ships, pave our roads, drive our trucks, police our streets, man our defenses; because they are the muscle and heart that keeps the country moving; and because America needs them as much as they need America.

We can begin by making an agenda for action and focusing it upon the areas that most seriously affect working people: jobs, housing, health care, educational opportunities, and retirement.

Our basic goal should be to achieve full employment, so that workers can be confident that their jobs are secure. Also we must establish the concept of the government as “employer of last resort” for men and women who cannot find jobs in the private sector.

We face a great paradox in American society today: We have more than five million unemployed men and women in a country burdened with a huge backlog of unmet needs—in our parks and streets, slums and countryside, schools and colleges, libraries, hospitals, nursing homes, public buildings, indeed throughout the public and nonprofit sectors of this economy. For the government to serve as “employer of last resort” would ensure that all Americans have a job, and full employment would in turn ease tensions between white and black working people.

Another cause of conflict between blacks and whites is housing. Lower-middle-class white Americans look at the economic walls shutting them out of many suburbs and feel they are being left behind to share what little they have with what they see as an onrushing group of blacks who drive down property values wherever they go. Here, too, many working-class whites look with envy and anger at housing programs that somehow never seem to be available to them.

For many years federal housing assistance was geared to public housing projects rather than to individual home ownership. Lower-middle-class families theoretically are eligible for FHA and VA mortgage insurance programs, but higher housing costs have made it increasingly difficult for them to participate.

An average new home purchased in 1965 with an FHA-insured mortgage cost \$16,800. Expenses for mortgage payments, taxes, insurance, utilities, and maintenance came to approximately \$147 per month. In 1970 a similar house built on a similar lot cost about \$24,500, with monthly payments of nearly \$265—a 78 per cent increase in the effective cost of buying and maintaining a new home. A man earning less than \$10,000 a year simply cannot afford these prices.

To fill the expanding cost-income gap, Congress in 1968 passed a subsidy program to assist low-income families wishing to purchase or rent decent housing. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the typical family moving into a new home under this program in 1970 had an income of \$6,200. The average home purchased had a mortgage of \$17,650, and the family received a federal subsidy of \$80 per month to help cover the total monthly mortgage payment of \$171.

The problem is that these homes do not exist in sufficient numbers. Normally, the mortgages under this new home-ownership law are limited to \$18,000 for a unit of up to three bedrooms. For a unit of four bedrooms or more for families of five or more, the limitation is \$21,000. In high-cost areas these limits can be increased to \$21,000 and \$24,000, respectively. It is tough, if not impossible, to find a home at these prices, however. The median sales price of a new one-family home in America is \$25,000. In the crowded Northeast the

cost is more than \$30,000. In fact, while 63 per cent of the homes built in 1963 were priced under \$20,000, only 34 per cent can be bought for that amount now.

To make more housing available, our subsidy programs must be expanded by raising the ceilings on both income and price. Only then can working people feel confident that adequate housing at a reasonable price will always be available for them. This will raise the costs of the program dramatically, but these increases can be controlled if we open up the suburbs to more low- and moderate-income housing. The same forces that have trapped the blacks in the inner cities have also limited the mobility of white lower-middle-class Americans. They are now forced to compete with blacks for the limited supply of affordable housing. The lower middle class, therefore, has an equal stake in opening up the suburbs to low-income housing.

The next item on our agenda for action is health. Simply stated, this nation must adopt a program of national health insurance. For about five million affluent Americans, major sickness or injury may be an inconvenience or personal tragedy—but not a cause of bankruptcy. These people don’t sweat out questions such as, Should we pay the rent this month or the hospital? The grocer or the doctor? Is a sick child something we can afford this winter or next? They don’t think about collection agencies, hospital attorneys, and bankruptcy courts. They spend little time worrying about whether they will lose their health insurance if they are laid off during a rough economic period.

For more than 200 million Americans, however, these matters are a constant, gnawing worry. The symbol of medicine is no longer the Red Cross or the physician’s insignia, but the dollar sign. Between 1960 and 1970 hospital costs almost tripled and doctors’ fees nearly doubled. The average day in the hospital that cost \$32.23 in 1960 cost \$79.83 in 1970. The complete physical that cost \$57 as recently as 1968 cost \$100 in 1970.

If developments in health insurance had kept pace with the increases in cost, that would have relieved the problem significantly. But health insurance programs did not keep pace. In the face of rising costs, twenty-four million Americans still have no hospital insurance at all. That is one in every seven persons under the age of sixty-five. One in five Americans—or thirty-five million people—are without surgical insurance.

Devising a successful national health insurance program is an awesome and complex task. First, the program should be federally financed; second, it should establish one program for the entire nation; third, it should be open to everyone without exception; and fourth, it should have no restrictions on the medical services that are covered or the length of time a person may receive the medical treatment he needs.

The program should not be totally dominated by the federal government or the private insurance industry. Instead, each state should be allowed to make its own decision on how to administer the program. The governor and the legislature would select whatever agency they wished to do the job. They could choose a Blue Cross carrier, a commercial company, a combination of the two, or an existing state agency, or they could establish a semi-independent public corporation. The choice would be theirs. But the program would have to meet federal standards of entitlement, administration, cost control, and quality control.

By allowing for regional variation and experimenta-



tion, by allowing for continual review and at least the possibility of local control of the system, and by allowing the health care issue to be politicized to a point where a governor would be held accountable by the electorate for his administration of the program, concern for satisfying the consumer would be heightened.

It will take time to implement such a program. We should use that interval to work out the details in a series of pilot programs. Too often in this country we have adopted major social programs with no idea whether or how they will work. We could have avoided much of the waste we now find in federal programs had we been willing at the start to admit our uncertainties and to begin on a smaller scale.

Unemployment and medical bills are great burdens on working families. The lack of higher educational opportunities for their children is another. For example, as a nation we place a high premium on a college education but as yet have not guaranteed every American youngster the right to obtain his degree. Our goals should be to give that guarantee to all intelligent and interested youngsters, regardless of their parents' financial resources, and to encourage those who, for one reason or another, are just filling up desk space at college to use their time more profitably. Academic ability is not a gift only the rich enjoy any more than an interest in nonacademic subjects is limited to the children of working people.

At the same time that we increase educational opportunity we should attempt to overcome our national obsession with college. Americans should recognize that good mechanics are as important to our society as competent lawyers. In fact, most of us rarely require the services of a lawyer. The same is not true of our need for mechanics, plumbers, and other skilled workmen, without whose talents our society would literally collapse.

We have begun compensatory and catch-up programs for ghetto students to enable them to go to college. In many cases academic standards are lowered to permit admission, and then remedial programs are started to accelerate the progress of disadvantaged students. They are also given scholarships, loans, or jobs on or near the campus.

These programs obviously are important and should be expanded. But compare them with the opportunities offered a working-class boy or girl. Suppose the student's grades were ordinary in high school and, therefore, he can't get into college. No effort is made to lower academic standards for him, even though his intellectual qualifications may be much higher than those of the black child from the ghetto. Even if the working-class boy is admitted, there are no special tutorial programs offered him. Nor are there special scholarships, loans, or jobs. The government's investment in the GI Bill has been repaid many times over by the millions of veterans who have received assistance. Why not provide assistance to *everyone* qualified to attend college whose parents are unable to afford tuition?

The federal government is now spending more than \$500-million a year supporting vocational education programs. This figure also should be increased. We should be building technical institutes across the country. This investment, too, will be returned to us manifold. In large measure this nation's wealth and pre-eminence in the world are the result of the technical know-how our people enjoy. American technical skill is famous throughout the world. We are great

builders and earth-movers. Every youngster who does not go to college should have the opportunity to attend a vocational or technical school. There should be one or two in every metropolitan area with a population of more than 40,000. That school should function in response to the needs of the community in which it is located.

Finally, to help working-class Americans, we must guarantee them a decent, reasonably comfortable, dignified retirement. If a society is judged by the care it takes of its elderly members, American society is a failure. To be old in America is too often to be poor. Most working-class people retire and live at or near the poverty level. In 1969 the aged had less than half the income of those under sixty-five. By December 1970, according to the Senate's special committee on aging, approximately five million of the twenty million aged Americans lived in poverty, a rate of poverty twice that of our society generally.

Many of the aged poor simply are those who have been poor all their lives and have grown old. But an increasing number of them are working-class Americans who, while working, made enough to stay out of poverty yet were unable to save much for their retirement and have found that pensions and Social Security cannot provide them with a decent standard of living.

In addition, many workers who are ill, unemployed, or in very low-paying jobs are being forced to retire before age sixty-five and, therefore, accept reduced Social Security benefits. Many such persons simply cannot find jobs with which to supplement their incomes. Widespread unemployment among those over forty-five years of age is increasing faster than in any other age group. This unemployment lasts longer than it does for younger workers, and the older person has greater difficulty in finding a job at the same pay level after a prolonged layoff. As a result, a new class of aging poor is being created.

Beyond the more than one million men and women over forty-five who are unemployed and seeking employment are more than eight million males forty-five and older who have totally withdrawn from the work force and are not reflected in unemployment statistics. Another twenty million women in this age group are also not in the labor force. Assuming that only 30 per cent of the men and 10 per cent of the women want and need jobs—a conservative estimate made by the Senate special committee on aging—the “real” unemployment for persons forty-five and older would approach 5.5 million—500,000 more than the total reported unemployed in the entire United States.

The federal government has ignored this plight of middle-aged people and thereby has contributed to the resentment felt by workers against a government that cares for the rich and attempts to provide for the poor but ignores the average man. Less than 10 per cent of the nation's manpower training and re-training effort has focused on people forty-five and older, their high unemployment notwithstanding.

The first thing we need to do is ensure that those on Social Security receive adequate incomes. A Social Security Administration study showed that one-fourth of aged couples and two-fifths of single beneficiaries receiving Social Security depended on it alone for their support. At present the most that a retired couple can receive is a little over \$200 a month, and a single or a widowed person receives a little more than half that. These figures are much too low, as shown by the fact that 1.2 million Social Security recipients

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are forced to rely on welfare as well as Social Security for their subsistence. Congress is considering increases in Social Security this year, but hundreds of thousands of recipients may *still* have to seek welfare help as well.

Some who object to significant increases in Social Security argue that the program was never meant to provide full support during retirement. That is correct. But Social Security is not a religion or a sacred ledger handed down from on high. If it is not a full retirement program for the elderly, then let us change it. All it would take would be a majority of members of the Senate and House and the signature of the President to sufficiently amend the Social Security law to enable every person in America to live out his non-working years in reasonable comfort and dignity. This will require a larger investment in Social Security by working people, but I do not think they will mind if, at the same time, they understand that this will guarantee them a comfortable retirement.

As Social Security deductions from paychecks are increased, however, the system should be made more equitable. Social Security taxes are regressive, forcing low-paid workers to surrender a much higher percentage of their income than highly paid employees. The injustice arises because everyone covered by Social Security is taxed 5.2 per cent of his first \$9,000 of earnings, but not taxed at all for any earnings in excess of that figure.

This formula is fine for Harry Smith, who makes \$40,000 a year. His Social Security contribution comes to \$468, or 1 per cent of his total income. But for Joe Taylor, who makes only \$9,000, and also pays \$468, this is 5.2 per cent of his salary—a rate five times greater than that paid by Harry Smith. There is no justification for this difference. Social Security should be reformed so that everyone pays a more reasonable share of their income and receives more adequate benefits.

Another inequity in the Social Security system is the limitation imposed on income received by Social Security pensioners. Many elderly persons are eager to work and help support themselves. But the government discourages work by penalizing them for every dollar earned above \$1,680 a year.

Consider a widow receiving Social Security benefits. She receives \$150 a month from the program. Then she takes a job that pays her \$3,600 a year. For every two dollars she earns over \$1,680 and up to \$2,880, she must forfeit one dollar in Social Security benefits. Above \$2,880 she loses benefits on a dollar-for-dollar basis. This limitation applies until the age of seventy-two, when she will be allowed to earn any amount without losing Social Security benefits.

The effect of this earning limitation penalizes the working class. While our working widow is losing benefits for every dollar earned, our friend Smith is allowed, on retirement, to receive all of his income from investments, stocks, bonds, copyrights, patents, rentals, dividends, and pensions without losing a penny of Social Security benefits even if his outside income is \$100,000. Two million elderly workers, meanwhile, are losing some or all of their Social Security benefits, for which they paid a higher percentage of their salaries. This is wrong and must be changed if Social Security is to be a program that meets the needs of the lower middle class. Proposals are now pending before Congress to raise the income ceiling, but this is only a start in the right direction.

Social Security, of course, is not the sole means of providing for the retirement of our citizens. Approxi-

mately \$140-billion is now invested in 34,000 private pension funds covering thirty million workers. Unfortunately, more than half of the private work force is employed by a company or union that does not have a pension plan. As many as half of those workers who have a plan may not receive pension benefits when they retire, and more than half of all persons who will receive private pension benefits will receive less than \$1,000 a year.

The fine print in many pension plans rivals those famous life insurance policies that, after the disclaimers, cover you against being run over by a herd of buffalo in downtown Detroit. Many pension plans provide no benefits for widows or widowers, require many years of service before a worker has a right to any pension, and cause him to forfeit all rights if he changes jobs. As a *New York Times* survey showed last year, private pension plans are "a phantom for millions of workers who never collect them."

We are slowly becoming aware of this problem. Proposals have been made to allow workers to transfer their interest in one pension plan to another when they change jobs, to shorten the years of work necessary to qualify for pension rights, and to give tax deductions to those individuals and businesses investing in pension plans for themselves or their employees.

These proposals all move in the right direction. Ralph Nader has a simpler idea. Each employee would be responsible for arranging his own retirement plan. His employer would make payments to a fund chosen by the employee, who could transfer his interest at any time. The funds would therefore compete on the open market to provide better benefits. The government would set minimum standards for all funds and would provide insurance to avoid the increasing problem of pension fund failures.

All of these suggestions deserve serious consideration. Whatever we do, we must help workers to ensure that their retirement years will not be years of poverty and insecurity.

That is my proposed agenda for action to improve the economics and quality of life for working Americans. I don't pretend to have all the answers for these very complicated problems and have only briefly indicated what I feel are solutions to the major problems. A final item remains. No government can achieve a solution without the people's support. I would like to suggest that we alter the tone and style of our public and private discussions about our most pressing problems. We should raise our level of tolerance for the ideas and proposals of those with whom we disagree. We should stop talking only to those with whom we agree and try to put ourselves in the shoes of others.

As the decade of the Sixties wore on, the level of public and private discussion in this country hit rock bottom. Angry outbursts punctuated too many sentences. Thoughtful, considered opinions were replaced by stormy assertions and bullying tactics, many of them directed at and then returned by the working class. As a result, a good number of American workingmen and women who once thought of themselves as tolerant, progressive, understanding citizens of a great nation now have become resentful and bitter. Why be tolerant, they ask, when progress seems to help those beneath us and those above us but never *us*?

Protest is important. People should work and fight for their rights. But, ultimately, we will rise or fall together, and this means that no class of our society can be downgraded or forgotten. □



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# Saturday Review of THE ARTS

Two of America's most arresting writers, the novelist Norman Mailer and the poet Adrienne Rich, are examined in this month's arts supplement. As the essay on Mailer by Richard Poirier and the interview with Adrienne Rich by David Kalstone make abundantly clear, both of these artists have faced an excruciating problem but have faced up to it in quite different ways.

How does a writer entertain at once a private vision and a public position? Can fiction and poetry mix with responsible politics, or will the mixture always produce inferior art and unreliable opinion?

There was a time when American authors would not have taken such questions seriously. In the years following World War II most poets and many novelists would have replied fluently that the whole "problem" was no problem at all. Of course, political issues might demand support or protest from a writer, but only in his or her capacity as a private citizen. You might sign a manifesto or join a committee. You might even register your disapproval of convention by showing up drunk or in sandals at a publisher's cocktail party. Your *art*, however, was not ideological. No, it was derived from a "Negative Capability," the phrase that Keats coined and explained as that invaluable faculty called into play "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Commenting on Keats's theory in 1951, Lionel Trilling, the dean of American critics, could write: "Negative Capability, the faculty of not having to make up one's mind about everything, depends upon the sense of one's personal identity and is the sign of personal identity." According to this esthetic view, the artist's creativity is more important than his convictions. Trilling's admirers, if not Trilling himself, might have said that Dostoevsky cannot be criticized because he advocated autocracy, for after all he did write *The Brothers Karamazov*; Ezra Pound cannot be held responsible for his anti-Semitism, for he did compose the brilliant first thirty cantos.

Today many writers are uncomfortable with this doctrine. They can no longer be so certain that art and

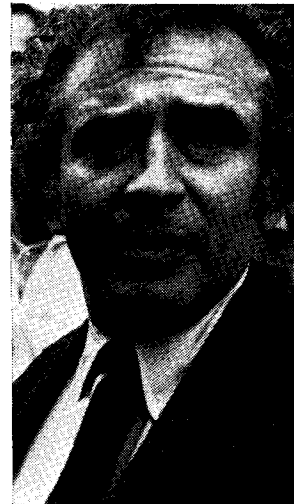
life touch one another only tangentially. Fiction and poetry can change events and also be events; every book is a political act, even if only tacitly. Norman Mailer and Adrienne Rich are representative of those writers who have emerged from the formalism of the Fifties into the activism of the Seventies. But their shared concern for capturing in words contemporary

social energies—and their certitude that sexuality is the source of those energies—are their only points of agreement. Mailer, as Poirier argues, seems to have a terror of accepting any accepted view of things. He must stay out of step, must march to his own erratic drummer, must champion Left conservatism and an odd brand of male supremacy based on the notion that only by ruling women can men hope to be their equals. In Poirier's view Mailer is compelled to reject all words and ideas

that are contaminated by being in common currency; taking issue is essential to his creative strategy.

Adrienne Rich, by contrast, has submitted to the current ideas of the women's movement. She has not turned herself inside out in order to have an "interesting" opinion on the liberation of her sex; probably nothing she has said in her interview would cause Kate Millett to disagree with her. But if Rich has accepted the women's "line," how can she write well? Isn't she simply versifying *Sexual Politics*?

Not at all. The relationship between the sexes is, after all, a venerable but inexhaustible theme. Now that women are attempting to redefine that relationship, to extirpate all preconceptions, and find a new way to talk to men, the talk itself must be invented. As Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" (printed in this issue) demonstrates, the new talk is not cant. In fact, Rich's verse calls to mind the prediction made in 1871 by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud: "When the infinite servitude of woman will have ended, when she will be able to live by and for herself; then . . . she too will be a poet. Women shall discover the unknown. Will her world be different from ours? She will discover strange, unfathomable things, repulsive, delicious. We shall take them; we shall understand them." □





# New Realism in Sculpture: LOOK ALIVE!

It is now ten years since the Sidney Janis Gallery astounded the art world with an exhibition of Pop Art. The New York art critics were outraged that a gallery as prestigious as Sidney Janis's should give prominence to a Pop culture movement that few of them took seriously. Claes Oldenburg's gooey cakes and yummy pies, they were willing to concede, were folk art, but definitely not fine art. Janis called this exhibition "New Realists," but he was jumping the gun on the *real* New Realists yet to come.

The real New Realists appeared on the art scene some four years ago with paintings so realistic they obliged the observer to ask: Is it a painting or is it a photograph? This winter Sidney Janis put on an exhibition of New Realist painters and included a handful of the even newer New Realist sculptors, whose work is so realistic that the subject looks alive. Once again, the critics howled with rage, *The New York Times's* Hilton Kramer calling the exhibition "yet another attempt to blitz the art market and make history." Janis called this exhibition "Sharp-Focus Realism," but in the catalogue introduction he wrote that "the title Post-Pop Realists seems clearer since it places them concisely within art and history." So the great Sidney Janis says the New Realism is art!

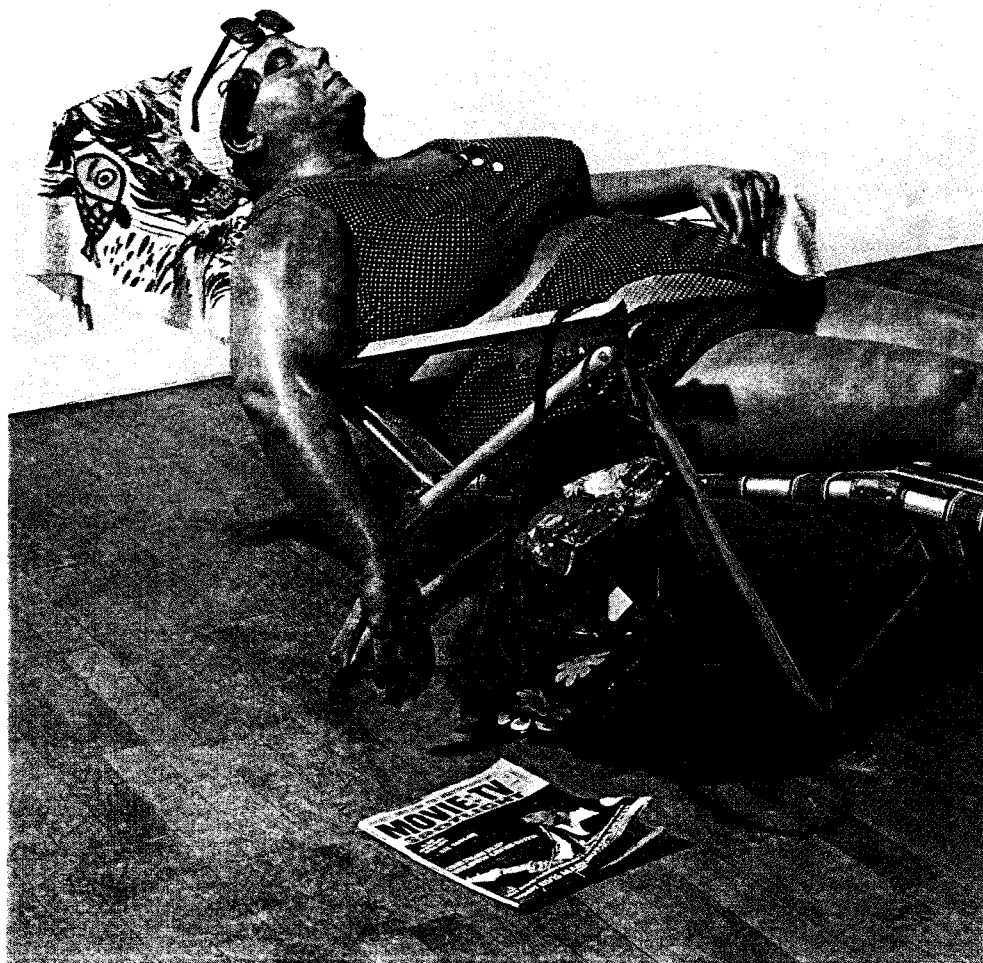
In the last six months in New York the sculpture branch of New Realism has forged ahead with a number of exhibitions of the human figure in the round, nude or fully and actually clothed, in papier-mâché, epoxy, fiber glass and polyester resin, stockinette and styrofoam—in every material except traditional stone or bronze. The New Realist sculpture did not, of course, appear out of the blue. George Segal is its most obvious immediate predecessor. Segal has been making plaster casts of his sitters for a decade, but he leaves them unpainted and rough-surfaced: His pale bus drivers and gas-station attendants are ghosts of themselves and their occupations. The New Realist life-size polychromed sculpture, however, is realistic to the point of shock. "More real than real," as one duly shocked critic put it.

One of the most realistic of the New Realist sculptors is John de Andrea, a

young Colorado artist who uses plaster casts of his sitters merely as molds for the final work in polyester resin and fiber glass, which he paints. "He's interested in a person in a rather ideal situation," explains Ivan Karp, cigar-chomping director of the O. K. Harris Gallery, who has done more than any other dealer to promote the New Realist painters and sculptors. At de Andrea's recent show his naked *Black Boys* frolicked in Arcadian innocence: Surely they could never grow into Black Panthers. The "ideal situation" in the case of his *Women* (realistic down to the pubic hair) would seem to be that of the Pretty Girl Next Door rather than her Ugly Sister. But de Andrea's girls are insipid. They would never make the centerfold of *Playboy*.

Duane Hanson, on the other hand, is interested in people in far from ideal situations. He would have given us the ultimate, undesirable Ugly Sister. (Hanson also works life-size in painted polyester resin and fiber glass.) His *Riot*, a black-versus-white confrontation on a sun-drenched Florida vacant lot, was indeed a shocker when first seen in 1968, as were his later *Motorcyclist* (dead) and *Bowery Bums*, which his dealer, Ivan Karp, considers one of his

Duane Hanson's convincingly lifelike "Sunbather" (below) was cast from a real person, then molded in plastic. The huge astronaut (opposite page) is part of Red Grooms's sprawling, three-dimensional moonscape, which celebrates the Apollo 15 landing.



Rosalind Constable, always among the first to detect new art trends, writes frequently for *New York* and *Book World*.